

# DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 071 561

HE 003 689

AUTHOR Sandler, Bernice  
 TITLE A Feminist Approach to the Women's College.  
 INSTITUTION Association of American Colleges, Washington, D.C.  
 PUB DATE 30 Nov 71  
 NOTE 9p.; Speech presented to the Southern Association of Colleges for Women, November 30, 1971

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.65 HC-\$3.29  
 DESCRIPTORS \*Feminism; \*Higher Education; Sex Discrimination;  
 \*Women Professors; \*Womens Education; \*Womens  
 Studies /

## ABSTRACT

Women's colleges have the unique ability to change the attitudes of young women toward themselves and toward others of their sex. The women's colleges can and must deliberately set out to provide a different kind of experience from what young women would find elsewhere. Female students should be encouraged, especially at women's colleges, to enter academic fields other than those traditionally reserved for them. In addition, women's colleges should be acutely aware of hiring practices for women in chief administrative positions. If female students never see a female college president, they might never believe that they could achieve such a position. In addition, women's colleges should make special provisions that would enable older women and women with children to continue their educations. The unique program that a women's college can offer is that of a female environment that deliberately sets out to create a climate that helps women discover and examine their role in society--a campus that is responsive to all women, and brings together on the campus women of varying ages, varying races, and varying backgrounds. (HS)

ED 071561



## association of american colleges

1818 R STREET, N.W. • WASHINGTON, D.C. 20009 • (202) 265-3137

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,  
EDUCATION & WELFARE  
OFFICE OF EDUCATION  
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRO-  
DUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM  
THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

### A. FEMINIST\* APPROACH TO THE WOMEN'S COLLEGE

by

Dr. Bernice Sandler, Executive Associate, AAC

Speech Before the Southern Association of Colleges for Women  
November 30, 1971

Whenever we talk about the validity and effectiveness of the single sex school, questions are rarely raised about the validity and usefulness of the all-men's school or all-boys' school. There seems to be little need to defend an all-male school. Even when all male schools consider going coed, the resistance to changing an all-male climate is likely to be couched in terms of "maintaining a pool of rich alumni" (by definition that's all male), and in terms of "providing leaders for society" (implying that leaders, too, are likely to be men, not women). Occasionally there may be statements that the all-male school may be better because girls are distracting from the serious business of the male scholarly world -- implying that girls and women are somehow not serious students and scholars.

But rarely does one see a serious defense of the all male school per se, in terms of what it ought to be or in terms of evaluating what it does. Somehow, the all-male school, unlike the female school, needs no defense. Almost by definition, the all-male school is "good"; it is rarely challenged on educational grounds. It may be challenged as being economically unfeasible or outdated, but rarely does one ever hear that it does a disservice to the young men who attend.

In contrast, the all women's school is much more likely to be attacked for providing an inferior education, for somehow cheating its students of some golden opportunities supposedly only found in coeducational institutions.

Part of the criticisms that are leveled at the women's institutions reflect the nature of our society which generally places little value on whatever women do. We still follow Aristotle's precept that "We should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness." My friends in anthropology tell me that in primitive cultures the activities of men and women differ drastically from culture to culture, but whatever the men do, it is more prestigious and more highly valued than the work that women do. If the women do the weaving in a society, then

\* Feminism, noun, 1. A doctrine that advocates or demands for women the same rights granted men, as in political or economic status. 2. The movement in support of such a doctrine. (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language)

weaving is usually seen as "mere women's work," with all that that means. But if the men do the weaving, then weaving is very likely to be considered very important and respected, perhaps even part of a religious ritual or sacrament.

Similarly, in our own society, we devalue what women do. I am reminded of one researcher who asked students to rate a series of professional papers. Each student received the same set of articles, but the authorship of the same articles was sometimes attributed to a man, and sometimes to a woman. The identical articles were consistently rated better when the author was thought to be a man than when the author was thought to be a woman.

So it is with women's colleges. We devalue them because they are for women.

There are some who would point out that the women's colleges developed out of a past which no longer exists, when it was almost impossible for women to obtain an education elsewhere. They would say that because coeducation is the rule now, rather than the exception, and that because less than 2% of all students attend women's colleges, that the women's school is obsolete, and that therefore it should go the way of the horse and buggy and other old-fashioned customs.

If today's activities in women's colleges were related only to their origin in the past, they would indeed be out of keeping with the times. But that would be like saying that the U.S., which grew out of our strained relationship with England, need no longer exist because we now get along quite well with our British cousins. History is never irrelevant in understanding how we came to be what we are, but history is a specious justification for either ending or continuing to be what we are.

Certainly the women's school no longer exists because of quaint notions about woman's supposed fragility, and her "need" for "protection from the cruel world." Today's young woman is no more fragile than her brothers. Like them, she needs to learn to live in the real world, not to run away from it.

Certainly, too, the women's college cannot readily be justified because it is supposedly necessary to teach women different curriculum or to teach curriculum in some special way. Math is math, and history is history, and good teaching is good teaching whether it is aimed at boys or girls or both. Mind has no sex. If there is any great validity to teaching young women differently from the ways in which we teach young men, there is no research to justify it. Nor has anyone even developed a methodology for teaching women one way, and men another.

If different methodology does not justify the women's college, then what does? Is it attention to the so-called "special needs" of women, the fact that they can become wives and mothers? Should they be trained differently and in special schools because many of them will become wives and mothers? Do we believe, as Alexis Carrel, the Nobel scientist, once stated, that "Women should receive a higher education, not in order to become doctors, lawyers or professors, but to rear their offspring to be valuable human beings." This is no more a viable justification for a women's school than is the notion of protection. Today's young woman can expect to work about 25 years of her life at a minimum if she marries; most women will work for the majority of their lives. Marriage and children are less of a barrier to work than previously. In fact, more than half of the women with school-age children work. More than 2/3 of all housewives will eventually work, although often with poor preparation, and often out of necessity. The more education a woman has, the more likely she is to work. The role of housewife, as a lifetime, fulltime, occupation is fast becoming obsolete. Without doubt, the women's colleges themselves no longer can justify their existence on the grounds of preparing women for motherhood.

Is the inclusion of courses on women a justification for the existence of women's colleges? Many women's colleges -- and coeducational ones, too -- have developed courses related to women's studies. More than 700 courses are being offered this year, including such diverse topics as "Women in 18th Century Literature," "Sex Roles in American Society and Politics," "Psychology of Women," "The Women's Rights Movement," "Women in the U. S. Economy," "Women and the Law," etc. These courses serve several functions: they are creating a new academic discipline, and they are developing the awareness of women students of their own role and status as women in our society, and an awareness of women as persons, as achievers, and indeed, as a topic worthy of serious academic study.

While I cannot imagine a women's college without women's studies courses, these courses alone cannot be the justification of a women's college. Surely the content of such courses is as relevant to young men as it is to young women. Young men also need to know about the role of women and that women can be studied seriously, and that women have contributed to art, to history, to literature. Young men as well as young women need to learn that computers could not have been invented had it not been for the work of a woman mathematician, Lord Byron's daughter, Augusta Ada, Countess of Lovelace. They too need to learn that the cotton gin was not invented by Eli Whitney but by the widow of the Revolutionary War General, Nathaniel Greene. She assigned the patent to Whitney because as a good business woman she knew that no one would buy a new machine invented by a "foo" woman.

No, including women in the curriculum or in special courses is no justification for having a women's college. These courses are valid for all institutions, be they coeducational, all-male or all-female schools.

What, then, is the justification for an all-woman's college? If a women's college is to indeed serve a unique purpose, it must do something different from the predominant institutions in our society.

Traditionally and historically, women's colleges have cast themselves into several roles, often unwittingly: educating women for their so-called special roles and needs, i.e., protecting them and educating them for motherhood; or educating them in much the same manner that men were educated.

When we protected them or educated them for the "special" roles, we often ended up with inferior institutions which perpetuated all of the societal stereotypes. While few, if any, of the women's colleges do this now, the image of the women's school as a finishing school still persists in the minds of many.

When we have educated women in the same way that we have educated men, we have often imitated the worst (as well as the best) features of the male-dominated educational system. We have given women a fine education, equal in every way to that given to men, and yet barely taking into account that the world does not readily accept educated young women in the same way that it accepts educated young men. Too often, our young women with bachelor degrees became the secretaries of the young men with the same bachelor degrees. Many young women, upon leaving a women's college upon graduation, have faced a kind of "culture shock" when they tried to enter a "man's world." Indeed, this has been one of the criticisms leveled at the women's college: that it does not prepare its graduates to cope in competition or cooperation with men. The criticism is somewhat fallacious, for the coeducational school does not yet prepare young women any better for the difficulties that they will face ahead in a world which devalues the work of women.

If one looks at the numerous goals of a college education -- those which speak of helping prepare individuals to best develop themselves in the best ways possible,

and goals which address themselves to preparing the young person to live best in a world beset by problems and rapid change -- then how does the women's college fit in with these goals?

Obviously, these goals are legitimate and noble aims and apply to all colleges. But a women's college must have more than just the same noble aims of the coeducational institutions. Just as a woman, in order to succeed, must be twice as good in order to earn half as much, so it is with our women's colleges: in order to succeed they must do more than our other institutions, and they must do it better.

A women's college must provide a setting and a framework in which young women can flourish and develop in ways in which they cannot readily do so at other institutions. If a women's college is to be truly useful to the women who attend it, it must act as a counterbalance to those trends in our society that hurt the development of women.

Let us examine some of these trends in our society. Little girls and little boys are treated very differently almost from the time the first blue or pink blanket wraps each person. Boys get doctor sets, girls get nurse kits. Boys are asked what they want to be when they grow up; girls are asked whom it is they want to marry when they grow up -- doctor, lawyer, Indian chief, etc. Children's books, even picture books, reinforce the notion that women and girls are passive, and that boys and men are the doers and the achievers. One charming book shows a group of children swarming about in a large tree. The boys are adventuring on the highest limbs, the girls sit passively on the lower branches, and one girl helps a small boy up into the branches. Although the working mother is no longer a rarity these mothers rarely appear in books or on television. If they appear at all you can be sure that they will be either nurses, teachers, or secretaries.

Although it is no longer fashionable to claim that women are inferior to men, women are nevertheless seen as somehow "different." But the list of womanly attributes isn't terribly admirable. Women are seen as childlike, emotional, much in the same way that blacks have been thought to be childlike and emotional. Both women and blacks take things personally; both are very sensitive. Women, like blacks, are thought to be very good with children, and to be a bit over-sexed. Both are relegated the dirty jobs in our society -- cleaning, service jobs, taking care of other people. If you go to any hospital, for example, and look to see who is emptying the bed pans, you can be sure that it is done by females, or blacks, or both.

Both blacks and women use ways to get around "the Man" -- flattery, pretended ignorance. White men are supposed to be dominant; women and blacks are supposed to be passive. Both ought to "know their place." Women are supposed to be happy in the home, just as blacks were thought to be really happy in their place until "outsiders" stirred them up. People who used to say "My cleaning woman says there isn't any discrimination," now say "But my wife says there isn't any discrimination." We call black men "boys" and we call middle-aged women "girls."

I do not mean to imply that discrimination against women and blacks is identical, only that there are similarities. Certainly women have a somewhat easier social acceptance than blacks. On the other hand, sex is as much of a handicap in employment as is race: among those who work fulltime, white men earn the most. Then come black men, then white women, and at the bottom of the pile are black women, who suffer from a double dose of discrimination, once as blacks and once as women. Black women are sometimes invisible, for when we talk of blacks we too often mean black men, and when we talk about women, we too often mean white women only.



If you substitute the word "black" when you hear the word "woman" you can perhaps get a sense of the similarities. Let me give you an example. If the language is somewhat offensive, I apologize in advance; for I use it only by way of example. "...I certainly feel that blacks should be treated fairly and have every opportunity that whites have, although of course most of them aren't too ambitious in the first place. Still, blacks ought to have educational and employment opportunities, and get paid the same as whites when they do the same work. But I just can't stand a 'smart-assed nigger'."

Let me read it again. "...I certainly feel that women should be treated fairly and have every opportunity that men have, although, of course, most of them aren't too ambitious in the first place. Still, women ought to have educational and employment opportunities and get paid the same as men when they do the same work. But I just can't stand a 'smart-assed broad'."

Blacks and women ought to know their place.

Too many women have learned too well the lessons they have been taught. By the time women students arrive at college, too many of them have had their minds hobbled just as surely as the Chinese bound the feet of their women. What is most needed in the women's colleges today, and in the coeducational ones as well, is a kind of de-conditioning, a kind of re-training, if you will.

The women's colleges must deliberately set out to provide a different kind of experience from what young women would find elsewhere. The coeducational institutions are not particularly sensitive or appreciative of women and their talents. Although women have been admitted to institutions of higher learning for more than a hundred years, it looks like many colleges have still not gotten used to the idea; judging from the more than 350 formal charges of sex discrimination that have been filed against universities and colleges. Indeed, the typical college program is aimed at the young, unmarried male student. Young women, who need higher grades in the first place in order to be accepted at many coeducational institutions, are not infrequently discouraged, both subtly and overtly, from pursuing academic excellence: "You'll only get married," "Are you really serious about political science?", "Education is wasted on women", and "Frankly, we have too many women students in this department already."

In contrast, the women's college must be acutely aware that it is a women's institution, serving women. It must provide a singular atmosphere where women examine and evaluate their lives as women, where students and faculty together deliberately and consciously set out to explore what it means to be a woman in our society. It must be a place where the patterns of discrimination against women are discussed and analyzed.

Often it has been said that women can be helped most by providing them with good counseling, and that this is what women need in order to raise their aspirations and vocational sights. While better counseling would be helpful, it does not make most of our young women change their lives or reevaluate their vocational plans unless something else occurs. Blacks did not need better counseling in order to raise their aspirations; what they needed was a keen sense of the discrimination they face, and the knowledge that overcoming the barriers of discrimination was indeed possible.

When women begin to examine their lives as women in our society -- when they see how discrimination against women has affected themselves, when they confront their own experiences as women -- then it is possible for them to begin to build new sources of strength within themselves.

It is in this area -- re-examining the role of women -- that women's studies courses can be of enormous help. Anyone who has looked at the extensive reading lists of many of these courses knows that they are not frivolous but highly academic, enriching the perspectives in traditional fields. For many young women (and for men, too) these courses serve a very real purpose in helping women to examine themselves as women for the first time in their lives. Many young women who have taken these courses have related that the courses have had a major impact on their lives and how they see themselves. By confronting themselves as women, they can begin to deal with the contradictions and conflicts in their lives. For this purpose, the women's studies courses serve a unique role, for unlike many academic courses, they are directly relevant to the lives of students. They are consciousness raising with intelligence and without hysteria.

Hopefully, women's colleges would offer an array of courses in different departments, such as "The History of the Women's Movement" in the history department; "Women in Different Cultures" in the sociology department. Interdisciplinary courses should also be explored. It is critical that there be a faculty awareness of the role of women within their own academic disciplines. Certainly a history course which deals with civil rights must include the civil rights of women; a psychology course that deals with the socialization of children must indeed discuss how girls are socialized in contrast to boys. Faculty, along with students, must begin to examine textbooks and other academic materials and evaluate them for their handling of women. For example, in one study of the 27 leading textbooks used in college level American history courses, women were virtually absent: no book devoted more than 2% of its pages to women; one had only 5/100 of 1% of its pages devoted to women. In many books Harriet Beecher Stowe and Eleanor Roosevelt are not even mentioned. In one women's college, in a course for prospective elementary teachers, students and their professor have begun to evaluate the curriculum library materials and have begun to press for less biased materials. Women's colleges can play a major role in pressing publishers for more realistic material concerning the role of women.

Equally important, the women's college must increasingly be concerned with the problems of all women, and not just those of the traditional college student. It must reach out actively to older women who want to return to the campus, to poor women who want and need education, to black women and other minority women who need a special helping hand. One of the most fascinating aspects of the women's movement which has hardly been commented on, is that it cuts across racial, economic, class and age lines. I have seen conservative older women work together with young radical college students on issues concerning women, with both profiting from the experience. The women's college can play a major role in bridging the gap between different groups of women. It must reorganize itself so that its concern is truly that of all women and not just that of young women who fit the standard mold of the young college student. For example, part-time studies need to be encouraged, so that women with family responsibilities can still complete their education. Courses need to be given in the evening as well as in the traditional daytime hours. Saturday courses, short-term courses and off-campus courses need to be explored. Part-time scholarships need to be developed so that women who can only attend on a part-time basis can still obtain the financial support they need. Students who have dropped out because of marriage or whatever reasons should find the door open if they wish to return. Certainly the transfer of credits, and the development of a degree in absentia would ease the burden of those students who move and cannot easily return to complete their degree, or who started elsewhere and need help in finishing. Residency requirements need to be revamped, again so that women are not penalized but are encouraged to return to school. Dormitory arrangements for married women with children need to be worked out. Child care services need to be developed so that mothers can continue their education. Regulations forbidding married students or pregnant students must be abolished, for their effect is punitive and not helpful to anyone, certainly

least of all to women.

What is indeed needed in both the women's colleges and in the coeducational institutions is a thorough re-evaluation of all policies and practices and how these policies and practices affect women as women.

By reaching out into the community toward all women, and by making it easier for all women to attend college, the student body will change, for it will include a mixture of women at all ages, with differing economic backgrounds and interests. Such a mixture can only be beneficial. Young women, instead of being isolated for four years with other young women very much like themselves, will have an expanded opportunity to have contacts with a variety of people, and thereby increase their opportunities for evaluating more realistically their own future plans. The lock-step of the four-year college would be broken, as women could enter and leave, without penalty, as the differing tempos and requirements of their lives demanded.

One of the often extolled virtues of a women's college is the opportunity for leadership. When young men and young women work together on extracurricular projects, they typically follow the pattern that is "normal" for our society: the men play the role of leader, and the women become the secretaries, note-takers and the coffee makers. Yet these same young women, if working together without men, will be leaders as well as note-takers. Many women, if they have only functioned in groups that include men, have rarely had the opportunity to learn or exert leadership. In the women's college, women students can be the editor of the yearbook, direct student plays, be president of the student body, and act as leaders in innumerable activities.

Nevertheless, the women's college must make an especial effort to increase leadership opportunities for its students. To do this, it must treat its students as responsible, active adults. We are all likely to respond in terms of the expectations people have of us. If we treat our women students as passive and unable to make decisions concerning their own lives, then they may indeed act this way. Women students need to be encouraged to play a large role in decision making on their campuses. The movement to give students a greater voice in the running of campus affairs is particularly important in the women's colleges if we are to help counteract the notions that women are passive and need to be dominated by others. We need to treat women the way we want them to behave. Increased student governance in the women's college would serve another purpose. It would lay to rest once and for all the outdated image of women's colleges as a place to "protect" and "take care" of "little girls."

The women's college must serve another critical function by providing role models of women actively engaged in the world of work, particularly in academic life. It is urgent that young women see older women in a variety of roles and activities that counter the stereotypes in our society. If young women never see a woman scientist, they are likely to continue to believe that women are not, or cannot be, scientists. Our society presents a model of women as married housewives. If you ask young women what they want to do with their lives, many will say they want to get married and have children. If you ask what they will do when their children grow up, they have no idea or concept that there is something else they should do. Yet all the demographic studies indicate that a woman who marries will probably have her last child by 30, and by 35, all of her children will be in school. What will she do with the rest of her life, if the only other women she has known are also housewives? If we are to have population control, women will have to learn to do something else with their lives other than just have babies. Young women need to see adult women working. Some of these women will be unmarried, some will be married without children, some will have young children, some will have older children. But all will show the young women that a variety of life patterns are



possible.

Traditionally, and fortunately, women's colleges have had a high proportion of women on their faculty. I recently read of a study which estimated the chances of a student's having a woman history teacher. In a coeducational liberal arts college, the probability is only 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ %; in a women's college the student has a 33% chance of having a woman history teacher.

Yet many of the women's colleges have shown a disturbing tendency that echoes what happens in coeducational institutions. Some of these schools are just as discriminatory in their hiring and promotion policies as are the male-dominated coeducational institutions. Women's institutions should be a model employer for women. Certainly, nepotism policies, maternity leave, fringe benefits, etc., must particularly be re-examined with a view towards evaluating the impact these policies have on women faculty and staff. I note with pleasure that at Princeton and at Harvard, women can now achieve tenure and full professorships even if they work only on a part-time basis. Our women's colleges should surely lead the way in developing new policies that enhance the employment of women. Enlightened policies that increase the number of women on the faculty would also serve to increase the number and variety of role models for students; they would lead the way for other institutions to follow, and they would stand as symbolic of the women's college's commitment to women as faculty, staff and students.

In many women's colleges, however, the number of women in key roles has diminished. Of the Seven Sisters, only Wellesley has more female than male faculty in the tenured ranks and in chairmanships of departments. Barnard has more women than men on their faculty, but men hold 78% of the full professorships and chairmanships. Vassar had 35 women full professors in 1958. In 1970, it had only 16. At Smith, the number of women in administrative posts has been declining for years.

I do not mean to single out these particular institutions, for I am certain that they are no worse than others in this respect, and are usually far better than the coeducational institutions. But the fact remains that women's institutions need to become a most hospitable place for women to work. Having women on the faculty is not enough; they must be in key positions as well.

I think, too, that we need to see more women as presidents of women's colleges. I do not mean to imply that men cannot be good presidents of a women's college; indeed, many are. Yet one wonders why it is that boards of trustees are increasingly unable to find "qualified" women for college presidencies. The number of women who are college-presidents, even presidents of women's colleges, is decreasing. A study done this year by the American Association of University Women revealed that there were 133 women college presidents who were Catholic sisters. There were only eight women who were not Catholic sisters who were presidents of women's colleges. That's less than the number of whooping cranes. Perhaps we should declare women presidents an endangered species. Surely in a country with a population of more than 100,000,000 women there are more than 8 women qualified to be president of a woman's college! Or is the only way a woman can become a college president is to get herself to a nunnery?

It is difficult to conceive of a white president of a black college; it is difficult to conceive of a Protestant or Jewish president of a uniquely Catholic institution. Similarly, it is increasingly difficult to justify why women should not control the women's colleges. This is not to say that men should not work in these institutions, but only that if the women's college is to provide a uniquely female environment, women must be in positions of power, including the presidency. Indeed, the majority of the key administrative posts in a women's college ought to be held by women.

If the women's college is to survive, it must do more than merely parrot what is going on elsewhere. It needs to provide a supportive atmosphere where women can unlearn the traditional notions about what a woman's life is like. In this sense, the women's college can serve a traditional role by helping bridge the gap for women caught between these crippling traditional notions and the promise of equality.

True educational equality will come only when we get rid of the stereotypes that limit women and their ambitions. For truly, women are disadvantaged long before they come to college. It should be the clear purpose of the women's college to counteract those disadvantages.

Unless women's colleges change, the economic problems that beset them will not go away. The unique program that a women's college can offer is that of a female environment which deliberately sets out to create a climate that helps women discover and examine their role as women in society -- a campus that is responsive to all women, and brings together on the campus women of varying ages, varying races, and varying backgrounds; a campus that acknowledges that women are often treated unfairly and differently in our society; a campus that actively seeks to provide a climate in which women can grow to be full human beings.

The chance for change is now in the hands of the women's college. By developing new programs for women faculty and students, by creating a new atmosphere, the women's college can indeed do more than merely survive; it can lead the way for the educational community in developing new ways of working with students which are truly responsive to their lives.